

# Racial Discrimination Is Alive and Well

Interview with Maria Krysan and Amanda Lewis

*Most white people think there is racial equality in the United States or soon will be. This belief troubles two experts in the field. The evidence of ongoing and significant discrimination on the job, in housing, and in education is unambiguous. And there is no indication that America is going to do anything significant about it.*

**Q** Condoleezza Rice, an African American, is now our secretary of state. Alberto Gonzalez, a Latino, is now our attorney general. I think there is an importance to this symbolism, that maybe such appointments do indicate progress in American racial relations. A Republican president certainly did not have to appoint them. By the same token, I notice attitude surveys in which most whites actually believe we either have achieved racial equality in

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**America or soon will. Do those attitude surveys portray accurately what white people now believe?**

MK: They certainly reveal what you have just described, which is that whites tend to think there is not a racial problem anymore and perceive far less discrimination than in the past. Surveys show that African Americans believe by large margins that racial discrimination still exists.

**Q. When did this trend begin? Is it new?**

MK: There has been tremendous liberalization in some attitudes—for example, should blacks and whites be allowed to go to the same schools? Whites think they should. When asked whether there are innate differences between blacks and whites, whites tend to answer that there are not. People do not believe in segregation anymore. They believe there should be racial equality. So those are the kinds of attitudes that show great progress. But, at the same time, a lot of other racial attitudes about African Americans persist among white people. For example, whites will claim that African Americans do prefer to live off welfare rather than work, they are lazy rather than hard-working, they are prone to violence. The attitude surveys show that those kinds of stereotypes persist. Attitude surveys also show that whites are not very open to living with significant numbers of people of different races and ethnicities. And they also show that whites are not wildly enthusiastic about a lot of policy measures that might be taken to alleviate racial disparities, such as affirmative action.

**Q Does a rough proportion come to mind concerning how many are opposed to affirmative action?**

MK: There is no rough number because it really depends on what kind of affirmative action question you are asking. Something like “Do you approve giving special preference to African Americans in the hiring process?” is going to show very small levels of support.

**Q What about that original question I asked—attitudes among whites about whether we have solved the problem of racial dis-**

**crimination? Do a growing number of whites believe it is not a problem?**

AL: A Gallup poll found that 79 percent of whites believed that blacks had as good a chance as whites in their community at securing employment. A poll done by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 1997 found that a majority of whites believed that blacks were doing at least as well as or better than whites in income and educational attainment. More whites than in the past believe there is very little racial discrimination and that blacks have as good a chance as whites of succeeding today.

**Q. A high proportion of black people think there is still widespread racial discrimination?**

MK: Yes. Blacks believe the racial gap is still large. When it comes to perceptions of current opportunity structures, blacks and whites are still far apart.

**Q** To what do you attribute this growing idea among white people that racial discrimination has by and large been eradicated, or at least almost eradicated, in light of so much evidence of persistent racial inequality that you discuss in your book *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity*.

AL: The recent appointments of African Americans and Latinos to Cabinet positions that you mentioned are important. There have been some symbolic victories. There has also been progress in schooling. For example, the gap in high school graduation rates between blacks and whites has narrowed substantially. It is also illegal, for the most part, to discriminate in housing. That has helped. There are, in fact, lots of ways in which the civil rights laws of the 1960s marked a big change in how we operate in this country. Even in terms of people's everyday conversations, you are much less likely to hear people using explicit racial epithets. There has been progress on all those kinds of levels. And the symbolic placement of people like Condoleezza Rice, Alberto Gonzalez, Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court, and key people like Oprah Winfrey or Michael Jordan suggest that African Ameri-

cans can make it. The problem is just that it is not nearly representative. If you look at the top end of CEOs in this country, if you look at a whole bunch of measures, blacks actually have not made much progress.

MK: I agree with what Amanda has said. The only addition I would make to understanding why blacks and whites have such different perspectives is to point out that there is little interaction in everyday life between blacks and whites. More than in the past, but not much more. Housing is still mostly segregated, for example. There is simply a lack of integration in everyday life.

**Q** Let us concentrate on three areas you both know a lot about: discrimination in housing, education, and labor markets. Can we start with labor markets first? African Americans have made progress by some measures in labor markets.

AL: Yes. Since the 1960s, there was a huge expansion in the black middle class. That is meaningful. If you look at people's life opportunities and experiences, there has been a major transformation. The problem is that most of this has taken place through jobs in the government sector, not the private sector. And in the last twenty years, as the government sector has shrunk substantially, those jobs have been threatened.

**Q. Let me get this as clear as possible. You say there has been a vast expansion in middle-class jobs?**

AL: Well, not necessarily. But certainly in the black middle class.

MK: Usually, when we talk about middle class we mean a combination of education, income, and occupational status. So it is indirectly a reflection of the progress in the labor market that is putting higher numbers of African Americans in the middle class.

**Q. But most of this progress is a consequence of having government jobs?**

AL: The biggest opportunities for African Americans since the 1960s were in well-paid government jobs—literally everything from running programs like Head Start, to working for the post office, to teaching. A whole series of stable government jobs that provide a middle-class standard of life were newly opened to African Americans.

**Q** But African Americans did expand their work in the private sector to some degree over this period, right?

AL: They expanded access to white-collar jobs, so the number of blacks in white-collar jobs increased substantially by the early 1980s.

**Q** Is that increase, from 8.2 percent to 14 percent in private sector participation between 1966 and 1999, in proportion to the population?

AL: The African American population is about 13 percent of the U.S. population right now, so that is in proportion to the population. But that number gets smaller and smaller as you go up the hierarchy of corporate jobs. So when we are talking about entry-level white-collar jobs, blacks are doing pretty well. When you start talking about middle management and above, the proportions get much smaller. Some of that result is a reflection of the accumulation of disadvantage—the intergenerational effects. It is hard to get access to the top rungs of those kinds of private sectors without access to top educational opportunities or social networks and without years of job experience.

**Q** Was there a period of greater catch-up and has it slowed down in the last ten or fifteen years?

AL: One of the markers you can look at is unemployment rates, which is one of the things that has remained most stable. No matter what the employment rate generally is, African Americans are unemployed at twice the rate of whites.

**Q. Is that at all levels of income and education?**

AL: Yes.

**Q** So even high-income or high-education African Americans generally have twice the unemployment rate as do high-income or educated whites?

AL: It is very hard to get unemployment data broken down by income, but the black-white unemployment ratio has been very stable for a long time. And in some ways it is even worse than that. When we calculate unemployment rates, we calculate them based on people who are actively looking for work. And so, if you look at the number of workers who are not even looking anymore, then the number for African Americans would likely be even higher. Particularly at the low end, there are so many African Americans who live in areas of concentrated poverty and who have simply given up looking for work.

**Q** So that would imply an even higher unemployment rate. What about income adjusted for, say, education, wages, and salaries? How are African Americans faring?

AL: Some progress has been made. If we look at median income for full-time workers, blacks make 76 percent of what whites make. There still is a real gap, but it is smaller than it used to be. And the gap narrows slightly at the top, with college-educated blacks making about 80 percent of what college-educated whites make. Much of the gap is actually between black men and white men because there has been a great deal of convergence in income between black and white women. For example, at the top end, black women make about 96 percent of what white women make. The problem remains, however, that women generally still make so much less than men that if you compare college-educated black women to college-educated white men, they are making only about 66 percent of what white men earn. Especially when looking at income, it is really important to pay attention to race, gender, and education.

MK: Another even more striking example of persistent racial inequality than income is the wealth gap. The wealth ratio between blacks and whites is something on the order of 1 to 12.

**Q. And wealth includes the houses and financial assets?**

AL: If you look at either liquid assets, things that you could convert into cash tomorrow, and all net wealth, that is, all your debt minus the things that you could sell—stock, houses, etc.—the gap is

dramatic at all levels. Low-income whites on average have more net wealth than high-income blacks do. As Maria said, if you look, for example, at just middle-class whites versus middle class blacks, whites have about ten times the wealth that blacks have. A lot of that is about intergenerational transmissions of wealth, and so it reflects historic patterns of discrimination. Certain policies, by the FHA [Federal Housing Administration] and other agencies, provided huge subsidies to white home ownership in suburban communities, where blacks had no access. There are many policies and private practices—Maria should talk more about these—that facilitated wealth acquisition in white communities that were not available to black communities.

**Q** What about the job markets per se? Do you both believe job discrimination is widespread in job markets?

MK: There is a new trend. Everything has become more subtle. It is less outright exclusion and more subtle dynamics. There is a recent study that is quite powerful. The researchers sent resumés out to a wide sample of potential employers. The resumés were identical except for the name at the top. Some had black-sounding first names like Tamika or Tyrone. Others had white-sounding names. But the resumés were identical. It turned out in this well-controlled study that the person with the white-sounding name was much more likely to get the call back than the one with the African American name.

**Q. Was this a widespread survey?**

MK: It was an experiment in Boston and Chicago.

AL: That kind of survey has been done in other places. A number of research centers have found similar discrimination in temporary employment, for example. So these audit studies in a number of labor market situations have found patterns of discrimination that persist, though they are more subtle. So-called steering is another example. Whites will get steered to higher-paying jobs like receptionist—front-office jobs where they are visible—and blacks will get steered to file clerks and other kinds of jobs where they are less visible. Mistakes

made by white testers will be excused or they will be given a second chance, but black testers are excused less often.

MK: Two researchers, Kathryn Neckerman and Joleen Kirschenman, did a study where they interviewed employers in-depth. They found widespread evidence of a racial hierarchy and belief in stereotypes. These views were quite readily verbalized by employers, who admitted that they, for example, selectively recruited in some communities. They preferred to hire white ethnics or Hispanics and had negative stereotypes of black inner-city job applicants in particular.

**Q. So you found these pretty powerful pieces of evidence for discrimination?**

MK: Yes.

**Q** Some people, as you point out, argue that such labor market practices do not reflect discrimination per se but a lack of the development of human capital among African Americans that is no fault of their own.

MK: That is why the experimental audit studies are so compelling—because in those cases they are controlling for human capital, so on the resumés they ostensibly have exactly the same educational background and exactly the same work experience, or lack thereof. And some of these studies are done on entry-level positions, so there are no great demands for higher-education degrees or anything like that. That is where those kinds of experiments are particularly persuasive that racial discrimination exists.

**Q** Let us talk a little about the educational attainments of African Americans. Is the gap closing or widening there?

AL: If you look at high school graduation rates, it is really closed pretty dramatically. The graduation rates for African Americans are about 79 percent, whereas for whites and Asians, who have the highest rate, they are around 85 percent. That is much narrower than it used to be. If you look at college graduation rates, the gap increases. Blacks are

only 65 percent as likely to have attained a bachelor's degree and only about half as likely to have attained an advanced degree.

**Q** What does that mean? Is there a way of making that clearer? In other words, are 60 percent of whites of a certain age getting four-year degrees versus 40 percent of blacks, or something like that?

AL: One of the dramatic things in the educational story that is important to think about, and that we emphasize in our book, is not just the white and black numbers, but also the data for Latinos, who are now the largest ethnic minority group in the country. Their educational attainment rates are even lower than those of African Americans. It is going to be a pressing issue in the coming years, partly because the number of Latino children is growing dramatically, their numbers in public schools are growing dramatically, and we have had not a lot of success with them in the last few years. Here is one way of looking at it: If you look at the census in the year 2000, adults aged twenty-five years old or older, about 27 percent of whites, are college graduates. For blacks it is only 14 percent, and for Latinos it is 10 percent.

**Q** I have read in some other work that the gap in school attainment has started to widen since the early 1990s.

AL: There is some indication right now that the numbers of African Americans who are attaining college degrees is falling. Partly, this is due to the way we fund higher education and the fact that we have drastically cut many of the programs that provided financial aid to students. People have to fund their college educations largely through loans, many through unsubsidized loans. So the costs of higher education have gone up dramatically, and the federal subsidies of those costs have dropped at the same time that state support for public education has dropped. As a result, African Americans, Latinos, and working-class whites in particular, have far less access to higher education.

**Q. So higher education gaps are increasing again between whites and African Americans?**

AL: There is some discussion that that is happening. And the retreat from affirmative action at higher-end institutions has also had an impact.

**Q. What about attainment and achievement scores? I also read somewhere that those almost might be diverging again.**

AL: There was a narrowing of gaps in scores through the 1970s and 1980s, which has stopped. I have not heard about a pattern yet in widening of that gap. But the progress in closing the gap definitely has stopped.

**Q. What do you two attribute that to?**

AL: There are a lot of competing arguments about that. One of the arguments that I find somewhat compelling is that it stopped around the same time that our progress on desegregating schools stopped. If you look at segregation patterns in education, we were making a lot of progress in desegregation nationally until the late 1980s.

**Q. So this is, to some degree, a housing segregation issue?**

AL: Partly housing—housing and school segregation. The way that housing segregation and all these things play into it is that schools that are majority black and Latino also tend to be high-poverty schools. So they tend to have far fewer resources, they tend to have more teachers teaching out of their subject area, they tend to have more teachers who are not credentialed, they tend to have far fewer textbooks, and the schools tend to be physically in worse condition.

**Q. Are there other explanations of the fact that the achievement gap is no longer closing?**

AL: That is the thing that is so interesting about the debate within education. Some people talk about poverty levels. For a period of time there was a federal and state retreat from funding public education. It happened in the late 1980s under the Reagan administration. But the

only explanation that I have seen that I have found particularly compelling is the one that links the stagnation to school segregation.

**Q** What about housing? We made big strides toward housing desegregation in earlier decades. Or did we never make strides?

MK: No, I would not characterize it as big strides. We have been inching toward higher levels of integration over time, but that typically is in the western parts of the country and some of the newer population-growth areas. In the Northeast and the Midwest, for example, there has been a modest reduction in segregation.

**Q. To what do you attribute that?**

MK: In addition to the dynamics of discrimination that we already mentioned, one of the explanations that some are now offering is a preferences argument. Essentially that view holds that people live in different areas because they want to live with “their own kind.” In the past, the argument was that whites did not want to live around blacks. In the 1990s two new arguments emerged related to preferences. One of them was that white people are fine living with black people now and there is no more discrimination because we outlawed that. So the persistence of segregation must be because African Americans want to self-segregate. They want to live with their own kind. There are a couple of problems with that argument, one of which is that when you survey African American preferences, they actually do not want to self-segregate. They do not want to live in all-black neighborhoods. Most of the survey data show that they prefer integrated 50/50 neighborhoods. The second problem with that argument is that it fails to ask why African Americans might not want to live in all-white neighborhoods and why African Americans might not want to live in a neighborhood that does not have a fairly high percentage of other African Americans. When you start to ask those kinds of questions, this reluctance to live in all-white neighborhoods, for example, or even in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, turns out to be very closely connected to prejudice and concerns about discrimination that they might experience at the

hands of their white neighbors. So it is not “neutral ethnocentrism.”

**Q. This, you agree, contributes to the education problem?**

AL: Housing segregation? Yes, absolutely. If both Maria and I were to hypothesize . . . I have some qualitative data to demonstrate that, and Maria is actually in the midst of collecting some more data that might illustrate it in a more broad sense. But, yes, the two are related. People often, in making choices about where to live, think about their kids and where they are going to send them to school. People often use race as a proxy for school quality in making those kinds of decisions. Just like in Chicago, where there has been a lot of talk in the last ten years about the metropolitan area becoming much more diverse in terms of increasing numbers of Latinos in particular, but if you look at actual neighborhoods, there are very few neighborhoods that are actually becoming much more diverse. Whites are moving mostly into areas that are 90 percent or more already white. So they are selecting into segregated white communities rather than staying where they are or moving into areas that are either already diverse or becoming diverse.

**Q** Could part of the motivation be to get into areas with very good schools?

AL: There was a study in Philadelphia after they had adopted a new school choice policy. What was found was that white families used race as a first cut—they just eliminated certain schools from consideration because they were too black. After they had made that first cut, they used a whole set of criteria to decide what was the best school for the kid. People are looking for good schools for the kids; everybody wants a good school for their kid. What happens, though, is that race and school quality intersect in such ways that people often avoid schools partly as they perceive them as having too many students of color. They do not just look at, say, test scores. So if white families with resources are avoiding some schools and using race by betting that if they send their child to a predominantly white school, it will be a good school, then it just reinforces the process.

MK: They leave the community. It is also important to note that they

take out resources with them. The evidence is not that white flight is the cause of segregation so much as it is, as Amanda mentioned earlier, the choice that people make about where they go. So they might leave a particular neighborhood, not because of the racial change, but perhaps because they have another child and they need a bigger house. But then when they choose the new neighborhood, it is usually white.

**Q. Is there still discrimination in housing?**

**MK:** Absolutely. Housing discrimination—again this is a common theme—is illegal now, but the common theme is that it has become more subtle. There have been lots of studies to suggest this. For example, researchers send testers out to search for homes, to apply for homes, and they get treated measurably differently if they are African American rather than white. They are not typically denied access to a house or apartment, but they are given fewer listings, they are given less information about financing, and so on. They may be given less desirable terms on a lease. Essentially a lot more roadblocks are set up for African American home seekers than for white home seekers. Then there are issues of steering. In fact, there is some evidence that steering has actually risen. By steering we mean that African Americans are steered toward neighborhoods with high percentages of African Americans, and whites are sent to white neighborhoods. More recently, the color-of-credit line of research has examined lending practices. In the lending process, there is discrimination when African Americans apply for a mortgage. Also, new homes are often not marketed to African Americans. Every institution that involves housing or renting shows evidence that African Americans are disadvantaged.

**Q. So we have a serious circular effect here—housing segregation, which is partly a function of discrimination, at least, leads probably to lower educational attainment or poorer-quality schools for a higher proportion of African Americans, which, in turn, may affect the labor market, and there may be further discrimination on the job.**

**MK:** Right. There are studies looking at the consequences of segregation for African Americans, showing exactly the kind of list you just mentioned: education attainment, employment outcomes, the

earnings, and, of course, the appreciation of homes and their ability to amass wealth in their homes. All are affected and interconnected.

**Q** Let me just close with some general questions about policy recommendations. What are your key recommendations?

AL: Some of them are policy recommendations that are really easy to imagine and not easy to deliver. One thing we have to recognize as a society is the enormous gap in wealth. Researchers at the Federal Reserve recently conducted a study of wealth and concluded that the enormous wealth gap was a result of intergenerational transmissions that were largely a legacy of historic patterns of discrimination, which would persist. There has been a lot of public contention around things such as demands for reparations, and there is clearly a lot of opposition to that. Even if we are not going to go down that road, we need to commit in some ways to thinking about how to build wealth in communities that have historically been locked out of opportunities to create wealth. That may involve subsidizing mortgages and investing deeply in low-income communities of color. In education, we have invested almost completely only in education testing. “No Child Left Behind” [NCLB] has required districts to disaggregate data by race. This has required them to really pay attention to racial gaps, not only in scores, but also in factors like teacher quality and a whole series of things. That has been helpful. But it has done almost nothing to actually close those gaps. So, in Chicago, for example, based on NCLB regulations, if you were in a poor-performing school, you were supposed to be able to transfer to a high-performing school and were guaranteed access to tutoring after school. But such mandates were largely unfunded. Those were the kinds of policies required but not supported. So, as it turned out in Chicago, there were thousands of kids who were in failing schools, and there were literally only a couple of hundred spots, at the most, in high-performing schools available to them. So there was absolutely no way to serve all those kids or to provide them with opportunities to attend schools that were actually succeeding. Part of the problem is how we fund schools using local

property taxes now. It becomes almost impossible to think about equalizing school outcomes because obviously some districts have far more resources than others. In Illinois alone, I could drive from where I am right now only twelve miles and be in a district funded at about \$12,000 per year student, whereas in Chicago it is around \$5,600 a year per student. There is just no way you are going to get the same quality of education with those kinds of disparities.

**Q. On the other hand, a state like California is pretty equal, if the spending is low.**

AL: Even within California there are disparities. Or take Michigan. It has tried to equalize funding. So if you look around the Detroit metropolitan area, like Bloomfield Hills, some schools are at \$16,000 a year per student, but if you look at Detroit, it is around \$5,000. You are absolutely right about California. There was the anti-tax movement of the 1970s—Proposition 13. Then it went from being one of the top states nationally, in terms of public school system achievement tests and so on, to being one of the lowest in terms of achievement. And as somebody who went through the school system there, I can tell you, it was clear that one year there were art supplies, the next year there just were not.

**Q. People instinctively blame that on immigration.**

AL: That is a huge tragedy. That is why you have the kinds of policies you have in California, like Proposition 187, which was supposed to prevent children of illegal immigrants from access to public schools. Essentially, it tried to turn teachers into immigration officers and force them to turn in kids. RAND, a California think tank that is by no means liberal, did a study about immigration in the state and found that there was actually a net influx into the public coffers because of sales tax and a whole series of things that illegal workers contributed to the public system. You see the hostility involved even with things like Proposition 227, which passed a few years ago and was against bilingual education, which has had some devastating impacts on Latino kids in the state. Most of the Latino parents I have talked to in California want their kids to learn English. A lot of them do not even want to speak Spanish to their kids at home for fear that it will hurt their child's school success. But the kind of educational,

pedagogical choice that forces a child to learn English in one year and then be mainstreamed is disastrous for a child's educational progress. Doing this is incredibly shortsighted in our new global world, where we should all be multilingual.

**Q. Going back to your policy recommendations . . . One regards the wealth discrepancy. You would also like to see equalized funding for schools. What else?**

AL: Another thing that really has been disastrous is the way that we enforce things like equal employment policies and housing discrimination policies. One of the shifts that the Supreme Court has taken in the last ten or fifteen years is that discrimination has to be shown, you cannot just rely on outcomes. So it is not enough to show that in a particular workplace blacks get access only to certain kinds of jobs or that they are paid less. You actually have to have a smoking gun—someone saying, “We are not going to give blacks those kinds of jobs.”

**Q. So you would like to see a reversion to the old ways of enforcing these policies?**

AL: New laws would have to be passed that would involve much more aggressive enforcement of equal employment policies and housing discrimination. If you look at the Equal Employment Commission over the last fifteen or twenty years, under both Bush presidencies and under Clinton (it was slightly better under Clinton, but not much better), there were far more claims of discrimination than ever get pursued. They are just not enforcing the laws.

**Q. Are there any points you would like to make on this, Maria?**

MK: I think the linkage between the policy recommendations that relate to schools would also have an effect on housing. And that in turn feeds back into the whole system that perpetuates inequality.

AL: The point that we both hit on several times is this disconnect between a growing majority of the population, particularly the white population, that thinks racism does not exist anymore. But it does, albeit in subtler forms, and this is another key theme in our book. It is frightening, because we have seen a leveling off of discrimination at very high levels. There is very little possibility for confronting or changing those patterns without a major shift in how we think about these dynamics.